

ON THE GENERIC NAMES OF THE NORTH
AMERICAN OWLS.

BY WITMER STONE.

As is well known, there has been considerable difference of opinion among ornithologists as to what species of owl should be regarded as the type of the Linnæan genus *Strix*. In the A. O. U. Check-List the question was decided in favor of the Barn Owl, which consequently stands as *Strix flammea*. In 'The Auk' for January, 1900, p. 65, the late Dr. Coues raised the claim that when Brisson, in 1760, divided the Linnæan genus into *Strix* and *Asio* he fixed *Strix stridula* as the type of the former. This question has been before the A. O. U. Committee on Nomenclature ever since, and it was in the course of investigating into its merits that I discovered other complications in the nomenclature of our Owls, which have led to the present paper.

Before entering upon a general discussion of the subject I may say, that I can find no warrant for Dr. Coues's claim. Brisson simply gave generic names to the two groups of owls which Linnæus termed (under his genus *Strix*) '*auriculatæ*' and '*inauriculatæ*'; and gave no indication of a type. This fact seems to me perfectly clear, and were there no other questions involved the generic names of our owls would remain as at present. Unfortunately, however, such is not the case, and Dr. Coues's further claim that "the last word on the subject has not yet been said" is abundantly proven.

To begin at the beginning: Linnæus, in the 10th edition of his 'Systema,' included all the owls known to him in the genus *Strix*, arranging them in two groups as follows

AURICULATÆ.

bubo.
scandiaca (doubtful).
asio.
otus.
scops.

INAURICULATÆ.

aluco (= *flammea* of XII ed.).
funerea (doubtful).
nyctea.
stridula.
ulula.
basserina.

These are all recognizable species except *scandiacca* and *funerea*, which have been usually dropped out of consideration as composite or doubtful.

As already stated, Brisson in 1760 gave names to these two groups, calling the eared owls *Asio* and restricting *Strix* to those without ears.

In 1799 Cuvier (Leçons d' Anat. Comp., Tab. II) did precisely the same thing, using the names *Otus* and *Strix* respectively; and in 1806 Duméril (Zool. Analytique, p. 34) again named the eared owls of Linnæus, calling them *Bubo*.

Hence we have three names coextensive and absolutely synonymous — *Asio* Brisson = *Otus* Cuvier = *Bubo* Duméril: and neither of the latter can be revived for any part of the original group included under *Asio*, i.e., the *auriculate* of Linnæus (cf. Allen, discussion of the nomenclature of the genus *Dicotyles*, Bull. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist., XVI, 1902, p. 162). This disposes absolutely of *Bubo*, and I had supposed of *Otus* also, but Dr. Chas. W. Richmond calls my attention to the fact that Pennant had used the name *Otus* long before Cuvier, and upon looking up his 'Indian Zoölogy,' 1790, p. 34, we find a plate and description of "*Otus bakkamæna*." The identity of this bird has been somewhat in doubt, but the majority of writers have regarded it as the small screech owl of Ceylon and it has been so accepted by Blanford (Fauna of Brit. Ind., III, p. 297) and Sharpe (Hand List of Birds, I, p. 286), though neither of them seem to have realized that in so doing they were bound to adopt the generic name *Otus* for the Screech Owls.

The identification of Pennant's bird with the Barn Owl, which has been proposed by some, cannot be upheld, as the description and size are quite at variance with that species. This, moreover, would make the Barn Owl the type of *Otus* and leave the Snowy Owl as the type of *Strix*!

In the preface to Pennant's Indian Zoölogy of 1790 he states that there was an earlier edition published by Forster in 1781, but upon consulting this I find the bird under the name *Strix bakkamæna*. Both Sherburn and Blanford, however, quote a still earlier 1769 edition, in which the name *Otus* is used, so that we are apparently safe in accepting this as the date of the genus

Otus, though I have not personally been able to consult this edition.

The recognition of this early use of *Otus* fixes the name beyond question upon the Screech Owls and cancels the action of Savigny who, in 1809, established the genus *Scops* for these birds. It also avoids the controversy as to whether the use of *Scopus* Briss., 1760, for the Umbrette invalidates *Scops* of Savigny, a question upon which American and British authors have long been at variance.

With the Screech Owls *asio* and *scoops* thus removed from the genus *Asio* of Brisson we have left only the species *bubo* and *otus*.

In 1815 Rafinesque (*Analyse*, p. 69) used the name *Bubotus*, but Dr. Richmond, who has examined a copy of this rare work in the Library of Congress, informs me that the name is "merely a new name or emendation of *Bubo* Duméril," and consequently falls with that.

In 1832 Wagler (*Isis*, p. 1221) proposed *Nyctalops* for his new species *N. stygius*. This bird is now regarded as congeneric with "*Asio otus*" (Linn.) Briss., and removing the latter to the genus *Nyctalops* we have left as the type of *Asio*, *Strix bubo* Linn.

It must not be thought that the Great Horned Owls were not provided with generic names, other than *Bubo* Duméril, which we have shown to be untenable, for we find three proposed in 1837, and others later. The former are

Ascalaphia Geoffr., *Echo du Monde Savant*, III, p. 4. (type *A. savignii* Geoffr. = *Bubo ascalaphus* Savign.).

Heliaptex Swains., *Class. Birds*, II, p. 217 (type *S. arctica* Swains. = *Bubo subarctica* Hoy).

Urrua Hodgs., *Jour. As. Soc. Bengal*, VI, p. 372 (type *V. cavearia* Hodgs. = *Otus bengalensis* Frankl.).

If my argument is correct, and *Strix bubo* is by elimination the type of *Asio* Brisson, we shall not have to consider these names at all, but I give them in order to complete the record. Moreover, they will probably not have to be considered in any case, since Swainson in the same year (1837) restricted *Asio* Brisson to the species *bubo* and *virginianus*, bringing us to the same point that I have reached by elimination.

If my views are adopted no change will be required in the genera of any of the 'earless' owls, while our 'eared' species will stand as follows:

FAMILY ASIONIDÆ.

Genus NYCTALOPS Wagler, 1832. Type *N. stygius* Wagl.*Asio* Auct. (*nec* Brisson).*Otus* Auct. (*nec* Pennant, *nec* Cuvier).366. *Nyctalops wilsonianus* (Less.).367. *Nyctalops accipitrinus* (Pall.).Genus ASIO Brisson, 1760. Type *Strix bubo* Linn., by elimination*Otus* Cuvier, 1799 (*nec* Pennant).*Bubo* Duméril, 1806.*Bubotus* Rafin., 1815.375. *Asio virginianus* (Gmel.).375a. *Asio v. pallascens* (Stone).375b. *Asio v. subarcticus* (Hoy).375c. *Asio v. saturatus* (Ridgw.).375d. *Asio v. pacificus* (Cassin).Genus OTUS Pennant, 1769. Type *O. bakkamona* Penn.*Scops* Savigny, 1809.*Megascops* A. O. U. Check-List.373. *Otus asio* (Linn.).373a. *Otus a. floridanus* (Ridgw.).373b. *Otus a. mcalli* (Cassin).373c. *Otus a. bendirei* (Brewst.).373d. *Otus a. kennicottii* (Elliot).373e. *Otus a. maxwelliæ* (Ridgw.).373f. *Otus a. cineraceus* (Ridgw.).373g. *Otus a. aikeni* (Brewst.).373h. *Otus a. macfarlanei* (Brewst.).373i. *Otus trichopsis* (Wagler.).374. *Otus flammeola* (Kaup).374a. *Otus flammeola idahoensis* (Merriam).

I regret very much to work such a revolution in the nomenclature of such well-known birds as these owls, but it seems to me after much careful study that these changes are inevitable if we follow the rules in our Code of Nomenclature, and I consider the sooner we have done with a disagreeable job the better.

It will be noticed that the alterations are due entirely to the discovery of the early use of the generic name *Otus* by Pennant and by the enforcement of the rule relating to synonyms in the case of *Bubo* Duméril. Had Dr. Bowdler Sharpe been aware of the former and realized the proper treatment of the latter case when he wrote his excellent review of the owls in 1875 (*Ibis*, p.

324) he must, I think, have reached the same conclusion that I have here presented.

A revision such as I have offered will inevitably be severely criticised by those who do not believe in any change in our nomenclature, but who do not offer any explanation as to how we are to arrive at a fixed system of names, without such change. When they ask, "Are we any nearer to stability than we were ten years ago?" I would answer, yes! There are obviously only a certain number of publications in which descriptions of genera and species occur, and with the invaluable works of reference that Mr. Sherburn is placing in our hands we shall soon be past the possibility of the resurrection of old names.

The reason that we have to make so many changes at the present time is simply because this phase of the subject has only recently attracted the attention of more than a very few workers. Why such wholesale criticism should be aimed at the revision of nomenclature I fail to see, when revision in classification, in any branch of natural science, is accepted as a matter of course. The changes in one field, since the time of Linnæus, are just as radical as in the other. When the anatomy and embryology of each member of a group is known, the classification will reach a definite basis; and when all the published names are found and interpreted the nomenclature will likewise be finally adjusted.

However, I fear that explanations will not be of much avail, except in the case of those who have been brought face to face with questions of this sort and have been compelled to make a decision; and I must confess that with these changes and others which have been elsewhere proposed in the case of certain of the earless owls, some of the pages of our Check-List will present a decidedly unfamiliar appearance. Indeed, there is danger that their contemplation may result, on the part of some of us, in actions which, according to Thomas Pennant, are characteristic of the owls themselves, for he tells us in his quaint 'Genera of Birds' (1781) that they are accustomed to wink in the day time, prey [pray?] in the evening, and snore loudly at night!